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This paper presents a content analysis of thirty-one bestselling picture books from the years 2010 – 2014 in order to reveal how women are portrayed to children. The purpose of the study was to discover whether or not young readers are receiving stereotypical gender representations through picture books that can affect their view of gender roles in society. The analysis explores professional roles adult female characters held in these books as well as what they were performing, where they were physically located, and what they were wearing.

The results of the content analysis revealed that women are more frequently present in children's picture books than men. These female characters however, are not representative of the abundance of job opportunities available to women today; rather they are predominately depicted as mothers with their primary responsibility being caring for children and other household duties. These results suggest that there has been progress towards gender equality in picture books but there is still more work to be done to ensure that the breadth of male and female gender roles is showcased.

Headings:

Children's literature -- Evaluation -- Sexism

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Sex Role -- Juvenile Literature

PORTRAYALS AND PRESENCE OF ADULT FEMALE CHARACTERS IN
CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BESTSELLERS
FROM THE PAST FIVE YEARS

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, the world's perception of women has changed and therefore the opportunities available to women have expanded in dramatic ways. No longer are women confined to household duties, rearing children, and teaching. Instead they have been liberated and are now able to enter careers that were previously off limits (Staiger, 2000). Changing this perception of what women are capable of has been an ongoing process that has strengthened so that most girls are encouraged that they can be anything they want to be when they grow up. The opportunities are increasing each day as women today are lawyers, doctors, CEO's, and politicians. If these career choices and more are possible for young girls, then they need to be able to see the wealth of possible career choices so that they know that they are not limited to stereotypical female roles.

Children are influenced by a variety of sources that can shape their perception of the future, such as television, parents, school, books and other sources of media. Books are a major source of subliminal messages for children as they read about adults and what adults spend their time doing. We are defined, at least in part, by what we read and the pictures, stories, and vocabulary that is used in children's literature to depict adults, and specifically women, plays a significant role in shaping the way that children view their future. The world as presented to children in picture books should be a reflection of the world around us because as children read they are learning social standards and setting expectations for what they will see in their life.

As women's career opportunities have developed over the years, one would expect there to be a correlating development of women's roles in children's literature. Young girls begin to understand themselves and make sense of their place in the world and in the workplace, and they look for explanations in a variety of places. Hopefully, they will be told by their role models, like parents or teachers, that they can achieve any dreams they want to when they grow up. The books that they read and that are read to them need to align with these goals. If a girl is consistently told that she can have any job she desires but then is constantly seeing women depicted in stereotypical roles in pictures such as cleaning the house and raising children then she is not getting a clear picture of the opportunities available to her gender. In order to adequately encourage young girls to reach their potential, children's literature needs to also encourage them that they have every possible opportunity available to them and they are not restricted by their gender.

Although one would expect to see women's career versatility reflected in children's books, it has been discovered in the past that this is not the case and that instead women are almost always depicted indoors as mothers or wives (Weitzman, 1972). This study was conducted over forty years ago and the results were discouraging, but with a new generation the question has emerged again for current picture books.

Literature Review

Power of Children's Books to Influence

The common saying "We are what we read" is not only applicable to adults but also to children. Although children often have less of an option in what they are reading (or in the case of very young children who do not have a choice at all in what is read to

them), the effect of the content of what they read is still present. Whether in text or in pictures, chapter books or picture books, children are being impacted by every book they encounter. There are subliminal messages and direct messages in picture books that can help shape the way a child thinks about, understands, and views the world. “Children’s books have the potential of altering perceptions and possibly helping to change lives” (Gooden, 2001, p. 91). Picture books are often read over and over again at a time when children are most impressionable (Weitzman, 1972) so what they read can have a lasting influence on them.

When discussing the role stories have in our world, Kathy Short expands this notion not only to children but to all of humankind since we all live storied lives. Stories are not just what make up books or movies, but rather “They are the way our minds make sense of the world. We work at understanding events and people by constructing stories to interpret what is occurring around us.” (Short, 2014, p. 113). This argument can be made for all humans who interact with books but her point is especially relevant for the way children read because “these stories create our views of the world and the lenses through which we construct meaning about ourselves and others” (Short, 2014, p.113-114). Short makes these statements in the context of children learning literacy as she discusses how context and the story behind what a child is reading matter to their literacy. As children are read to and begin to learn to read, it is necessary that the context of the books and stories that are provided to them is appropriate. Students are not simply learning the individual words on a page but are absorbing so much more information that is presented in a book like the story and the possible biases that it includes. Children develop up to 50% of their intelligence between birth and the time they enter

kindergarten (Stewig, 1973) so the time period in which they are exposed to a plethora of children's books plays a substantial role in shaping their minds. Whether it is books, newspaper reports, gossip with a friend, texts, music, or videos, stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives that it becomes easy to overlook or disregard the impact they have in the way we think about ourselves, others, and the world, but that does not lessen their impact even if it impacts us subconsciously (Short, 2014).

“Children's books reflect cultural values and are an important instrument for persuading children to accept those values” (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1127). This means that books set in the real world should be an accurate reflection of it or else a child reader will gain an inaccurate or outdated understanding of our world. For example, if a child was only given books from before 1920, they might come to the conclusion that women are not allowed to vote because there would be no inclusion of women voting until after the nineteenth amendment passed allowing women's suffrage. One study on child development compares stereotyping to information processing and makes the claim that absorbing what you read as reality is a normal cognitive function (Martin, 1981). It is not that kids are intentionally creating gender stereotypes or becoming sexist when they read books but they are just processing the information they are given (Martin, 1981). With this in mind, we realize that there is power in what a child reads because they are not able to discern different approaches to the text; they simply receive the story as information and facts. A child will often not even be aware of the impact a book can have on their view of life because the molding of their mind through a book is an unconscious process (Stewig, 1973).

The interactions that a person has at a very young age, both in media like books and in their real life experiences, form and change the way that children view gender. Chick reiterates this point by emphasizing that gender role beliefs are shaped by many factors including what they hear, see, and read (Chick, 2002). By the time that children reach middle childhood, their gender identity has been established (Berk, 2014). The process of learning about gender roles begins early though. It has been found that preschoolers first acquire gender typed responses through modeling and reinforcement which can be found in places like picture books (Berk, 2014). Stewig asserts that sex role identifications start in the early months of a child's life and are essentially completed by the time they are five (Stewig, 1973). Even at such a young age, children are beginning to formalize what genders mean and how they fit into them. Children's books contain role perceptions which encourage the child to conform to acceptable standards of behavior (Weitzman, 1972); therefore, children are likely to mimic the actions and portrayals they see in the books they read. Gooden writes, "As they develop, children look for structure in their lives and are driven by an internal need to fit into this structure" (Gooden, 2001, p. 93).

Chick expands this concept of children learning social structure from books when he addresses the flipside that these same materials can be used to change gender stereotypes. "The curriculum materials and children's literature that they are exposed to hold the beliefs and values we as a society have about gender. The books that adults read to children can help them to confirm, broaden, or modify gender identity in order to go beyond stereotypical differences." (Chick, 2002, p. 19). If we want the next generation of girls to understand the plethora of career choices available to them, then they need to be

shown these options at a young age. Unfortunately, once gender stereotypes are presented and accepted, they are difficult to unlearn (Chick, 2002). Whether gender is presented accurately or stereotypically in books, it is clear that it will affect the way children view roles in society, and this lesson is learned at an early age. "Gender misconceptions can be challenged early if boys and girls are consistently exposed to books with strong female characters and equitable gender messages." (Chick, 2002, p. 20).

What is more important than the message in a story is how it is approached and talked about with the child. The teacher or reader needs to help children understand that they can challenge the stereotypes by discussing the book and the ideas it presents. Chick points out that preschoolers accept the reliability of information in books without question, especially when read by adults (Chick, 2002) so it is imperative that adults point out what is factual in books and what is not an accurate reflection of today's society. Adults are able to recognize more subtle personality traits that are associated with each of the genders but research shows that children are not aware of these until they are at least ten or eleven years old (Martin, 1981). Children cannot decode complex characters like an adult could, but they are very capable of understanding the behaviors and roles for each gender. Evans boldly claims, "The texts we are exposed to in our culture indicate how we should 'read' the world. These texts tell us what it is to be a man or a woman in today's society, that is, we are 'positioned' by the texts and hence begin to act accordingly" with what we read telling us how to view the world and how others should view us (Evans, 1998, p. 5).

Women's Roles in Society

Over the past several decades, the career opportunities available to women have changed dramatically with an increase of women in the workforce and a decrease in limitations on which professions women are allowed to pursue. While organizations are still fundamentally male dominated, the ranks of women in organizations have grown exponentially over the last decade (O'Neil, 2008) which means that now more than ever women are able to achieve almost any career choice they desire. The shifts in the labor market that have afforded women more equal job opportunities are fundamental, permanent changes that are unlikely to reverse (O'Neil, 2008) so there needs to be a corresponding shift in children's books that reflects this change in the world and job market.

Novack explains this transition by saying, "With the gradual transformation of the United States from a rural, agrarian society into an urban, industrial state, women have slowly been drawn out from the domestic realm into the broader political and economic life of the country" (Novack, 1996, p. 58). In 1900, approximately one in five single women was employed outside of the home, with the agreement that when they were married their employment would be terminated. By 1950, this statistic changed into one in five married women working outside of the home. By the 1980's the number of women working outside the home rose dramatically as huge strides were made during the women's movement resulting in one in every two women being employed. Currently, we are seeing an even more intense change in female progress now that nearly two thirds of mothers are seen working outside of the home (Novack, 1996).

These statistics substantiate the claim that women's opportunities are growing at an exponential rate. In an article about the expanding career opportunities for women,

Staiger reported that interest among women in medicine and law has increased to the point where women and men are now roughly equally likely to list these professions as probable careers (Staiger, 2000). Staiger also reported that interest in business among women has also increased, but men are still more likely to enter this field (Staiger, 2000). The opportunities available to women have clearly expanded outside of the home and traditional female domains, “Thus it appears that many women who in the past would have been constrained to become nurses and teachers have more recently moved into managerial and professional occupations with higher pay and prestige” (Staiger, 2000, p, 235)

The feminist movement prompted questions about stereotyping issues present in picture books. Looking purely from a population standpoint as opposed to an occupation one, women should comprise fifty-one percent of the pictures if they were a reflection of society but in actuality there was a one to eleven female to male ratio (Weitzman, 1972). When Gooden performed an updated content analysis of gender stereotypes in children’s books she found that steps toward equity in picture books have advanced and there has been an increase in the number of females as main characters but despite this improvement, stereotypes are still prevalent (Gooden, 2001). Gooden suggests that “One start to improving equity for women is by reducing sexism in children’s reading materials” (Gooden, 2001, p. 92).

Women’s Roles in Picture Books Throughout the Years

There have been multiple studies over the years that investigated this question about gender stereotypes in picture books and each study has yielded varying levels of

progress that has been made in children's literature. This question arose in the 1970's with the women's movement and has been present ever since then. Researchers have studied the lack of women as main characters (Weitzman, 1972; Gooden, 2001), the stereotypical roles women are limited to in picture books (Weitzman, 1972; Stewig, 1973; Stewig, 1975; Oskamp, 1996), the gendered way that parents read these books to their children (Endendijk, 2014), and many other interesting avenues relating to gender stereotypes in children's picture books. The general consensus is that there is much room for improvement. Although picture books have seen some progress since this issue first arose, there are clearly still gender stereotypes that persist in the stories we are sharing with children. Today's culture is not perfect or free from gender stereotypes, but the majority of these studies show that children's books are still not an accurate reflection of our current society. One study concludes their findings by saying that "women are *not* depicted in the rich variety of professional roles in which they are engaged today" (Stewig, 1973, p. 49).

The first notable study, conducted in 1972, examined prize winning picture books and concluded that women are underrepresented in titles, central roles, and illustrations (Weitzman, 1972). This study became a model and reference for many others that would follow years down the road as researchers strove to find out if there had been improvement. Weitzman referred to this phenomenon of underrepresented women as the 'invisible female' because the majority of the books were about boys, men, male animals, and dealt exclusively with male adventures while women appeared nameless and inconspicuously only to play insignificant roles (Weitzman, 1972).

Although women's underrepresentation is bothersome, even more troublesome is the way in which these women are portrayed when they are found in the stories. The trend begins with young boys and girls where the boys are typically shown being active while girls are shown in passive roles. According to this study, this disproportionate representation continues into adulthood where women and men are equally sex stereotyped. While men tend to engage in a variety of occupations, women are presented only as wives and mothers in the books that were analyzed (Weitzman, 1972). The girls in the books are more often found indoors playing traditional feminine roles like pleasing or helping their brothers or fathers (Weitzman, 1972). These female characters are limited by their location in the house which does not allow for activities or adventure, instead they exclusively perform service functions. In their selection of Caldecott award winners, not a single woman had a job or profession; they were exclusively portrayed as mothers and wives (Weitzman, 1972). These results are fitting with the societal norms that were present and accepted during this time period, but the question remains: are these detrimental gender stereotypes continuing to permeate the children's literature of today?

Shortly after Weitzman, another study was conducted to see if any change had started to take place after the original article was published but they found that the unfortunate result of their research was that women do indeed play a subordinate, home-related role in children's literature (Stewig, 1973). Although this was their overall conclusion, there was minor advancement: while a vast 83% of the women were in homemaking roles, they did find 17% of women in professional roles (Stewig, 1973). At the time of the study though, 43% of women were employed outside the home so these representations of women are hardly accurate (Stewig, 1972). Another discouraging

realization is that the only professional roles presented were occupations that are predominately females such as teachers, maids, and nuns. Stewig claims that the homemaking roles that women are engaged in are not intellectual or creative with the most often occurrences being cooking and watching over a child (Stewig, 1973) which can lead to readers thinking that women are not capable or fit for creative, intellectual tasks. There is also an argument that even the activities of women like reading are not intellectual which is a strange assumption about the women's lack of intelligence. The study found that the men's activities were predominately active and they did not participate in domestic duties. Although the male characters held a variety of professional roles unlike women, the most prominent were not realistic professions or representative of today's culture so the argument could be made that both genders are being misrepresented.

Two years later, Stewig took another look at sexism in picture books and this time came to the conclusion that "mother is out of the kitchen and in the world, but only some parts of it" (Stewig, 1975, p. 151). This study showed that there had been definite progress in the field of gender stereotypes in picture books, but the changes were far from done. The study looked at 100 picture books and recorded all instances of women in homemaking roles and professional roles. It was found that women were pictured in subordinate roles in the home 68% of the time, much more often than in active roles in the community, with the most often occurrences being watching the children, cooking, shopping, gardening, and housework (Stewig, 1975). The most common professional role was still a school teacher but the other repeatedly noted roles included musical professions, medical roles, and entertainment roles (Stewig, 1975). There were also a

smaller percentage of books that featured no women, only 9 out of 100, but again every book had male characters in it (Stewig, 1975). Men's options are clearly portrayed as wider than women's but the professional roles do not align with the reality of life today with the two most frequent male professions noted being the circus and farming (Stewig, 1975). In addition to professions, the study also took a look at the character's recreational activities and found that males' was more active while females' activities are sedentary.

In 1981, Martin ran an experiment that looked into children's sex schema, how it develops psychologically, and how picture books can affect that. They found evidence that children prefer stories where the characters are engaged in sex-appropriate behaviors over those with sex inappropriate behavior (Martin, 1981). They also found that a child's success at a task was correlated to the sex appropriateness of a task (Martin, 1981) which supports what other researchers have said about children being motivated to mimic gender stereotypes once they have learned them. Children have stereotypes ingrained in them and one study learned that when shown both stereotypic and reverse stereotypic gender roles, children distorted the reversed roles to make them more stereotypic, like calling a female doctor a nurse. Martin studied what is leading children to absorb gender stereotypes and reports that children have a tendency to group information because it helps them process information and establish their own identity (Martin, 1981). This learning process of the world, including books, is what has led kids to make assumptions and quick conclusions about what men and women should or should not do which results in them thinking only certain behaviors are correct for them as a boy or girl.

Once again, Martin found confirmation that children are highly sex stereotyped by the age of four and suggests that these stereotypes are maintained throughout childhood

and often into adulthood (Martin, 1981). One encouraging remark was that “It is possible that the individual can change the evaluations associated with sex typing and/or redefine group membership, and develop a more flexible sex-typing orientation” (Martin, 1981, p. 1131). The article also references another study that realized that children recall more information from stories that have reversed or abnormal sex roles. This is encouraging to battle against gender stereotypes because it means that at least when students read non-stereotypical books they are more likely to remember them. Perhaps then even if a girl is exposed to numerous stereotypical female roles but is sometimes exposed to women that break outside of that role they will be more likely to remember it.

Since the issue of sexist children books has come to light, some authors and publishers have made an effort to reduce stereotypes in books and a study in 1996 also pointed out that there are groups that have compiled lists of non-sexist children’s books. Regarding the rest of published children’s literature, the study reports a gradual increase in egalitarian depictions of women during recent years but while the women were found outside of the home, they were often not employed (Oskamp, 1996). Oskamp replicated Weitzman’s study looking specifically at Caldecott award winners from 1986-1991 and found that men and women were equally distributed as main characters, a major improvement from the original study (Oskamp, 1996). Personality traits and characteristics are now where gender stereotypes are found because the characters’ visibility and location have progressed to fairly portray the genders with both as main characters and both mostly inside (Oskamp, 1996). Notable progress has been made with gender stereotypes fading but they have not disappeared completely because the study still revealed that female characters were more dependent and submissive while male

characters were independent and creative. Another consideration when studying award winners is that they are expected to be the superior books so this sample is most likely skewed to make it more egalitarian than the majority of books. In the 1972 study, Weitzman even admits that the Caldecott winners he analyzed were less stereotyped than the average book (Weitzman, 1972) which is appalling given the sexist results he developed from the high quality books. Overall, these newer books are doing a better job to “offer young girls a wider range of acceptable gender roles to model and greater variety of behavioral traits and activities that they can view as appropriate for them to adopt” (Oskamp, 1996, p. 11). Oskamp mentions that awareness of increasing gender role flexibility should be an important influence in the socialization of today’s children but the only way that it can influence them is if the flexibility filters down to a level where children can consume it, like in picture books.

Following soon after that, a study by Evans in 1998 asserted that despite being aware of the problem of gender stereotyping in picture books for years, the problem is not disappearing. In more recent years, books have been published that are pointedly non-gender stereotypical featuring smart princesses and male characters that resemble Cinderella and these are the texts that Evans chose to discuss with a group of children in a study. When given the opportunity to guess what roles a prince, princess and dragon would play in a story, all of the children unsurprisingly responded with stereotypical answers: the princess is weak and needs saving (Evans, 1998). Evans study resulted in the disheartening but realistic news that simply ridding books of gender stereotyping did not rid the world of stereotypes. An updated content analysis in 2001 also showed that steps

toward equity have advanced with an increase in females as main characters, but that stereotypes are still prevalent (Gooden, 2001).

The most recent research done in this area analyzed how parents talk about gender when reading picture books to their children. In previous studies it was found that parents are prone to respond or correct behavior that is not gender typical and this occurs even more often with girl characters than with boy characters. This supports the notion that not only are the text and pictures of a children's book important, but also the dialogic reading of it. If a child is read a book with stereotypical gender roles but there is a discussion about how these narrow roles do not align with the opportunities in the world then the child can learn a lot from what was a seemingly sexist book. On the other hand, if an adult negates the non-typical gender roles that are presented in a more progressive book when reading to a child, this discussion can lead to equally detrimental gender stereotypes of a more stereotypical gender book. A lot of power lies in the hands of how these books are read, presented, and discussed with children.

The research revealed that fathers talk more about gender stereotypes while mothers help label genders and evaluate how they formed their conclusion of what gender a character was (Endendijk, 2014). By labeling genders based on activities, parents are indirectly passing on gender stereotypes about what roles or activities are appropriate for men and women. Often if a character could be referred to in a gender neutral way, parents reading to their children still used gendered pronouns which conveys information about the appropriateness of certain roles for different genders (Endendijk, 2014). Mothers with egalitarian views communicated that girls could easily perform any

of the activities, (Endendijk, 2014) showing that the views of the parent or teacher can shine through when reading to a child to help them better understand gender.

Potential for Children's Books to Influence Children's Perceptions of Women's Social Roles

Evans writes, "It would appear that something happens to girls which leaves them with the impression that they are not as good as, are less talented than and cannot do as well as the men who surround them" (Evans, 1998, p. 5) and it is as a result of media, including books, that girls have been trained to think this way. Through books, children learn about the world outside of their immediate environment and so it is likely that a child's understanding of gender roles could be shaped by what they are reading even if it is not a reliable portrayal. Books often provide role models and through picture books girls are taught to have low aspirations because there are so few opportunities portrayed as available to women in them (Weitzman, 1972). The prevalence of gender stereotypes in both the text and illustrations of children's books restricts young readers from expanding their career aspirations and understanding the vast choices for both men and women.

Gender stereotypes are any assumptions that are made about the characteristics of each gender such as physical appearance, physical abilities, attitudes, interests, or occupations (Gooden, 2001). Sex stereotypes are detrimental because they oversimplify perceptions of reality and restrict life options (Martin, 1981). When gender stereotypes are included, the consequences can be monumental according to Weitzman who said "Picture books play an important role in early sex role socialization because they are a

vehicle for the presentation of societal values to the young child” (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1143). Martin explains how if gender stereotypes are taught, their behavior and thinking are impoverished by being confined to the restrictive and stereotypical understanding of men and women. Short writes that “Stories are also used to influence us, to provide views of the world that manipulate our emotions and perceptions” (Short, 2014, p. 114) and it is through these stories that children are making sense of our world through the distorted lens of stereotypical gender representations. “Young children should be made aware of the entire range of career choices for women, both traditional and nontraditional. Carefully selected literature will fuel children's awareness that girls' options are limitless” (Chick, 2002, p. 21).

Methods

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research method that is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within documents containing text and pictures (Busch, 2012). Researchers use this method to quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer, the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part (Busch, 2012). Content analysis can be helpful when trying to examine and define trends or patterns in works (Stemler, 2001) that that will be the goal of using it in my research. Content analysis can be done both qualitatively and quantitatively but for this paper only qualitative analysis will be done. Content analysis will allow me to categorize qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities to discern patterns throughout the

selected picture books (Julien, 2008). The purpose of this method is to derive meaning by making sense of the information (Julien, 2008).

An understood aspect of content analysis is that it is open to subjective interpretation, can reflect multiple meanings and is context dependent so researchers must acknowledge the perspective that they approach the text with (Julien, 2008). Since I will be conducting a qualitative research method, I need to address the biases that I personally contribute by doing the analysis and evaluation myself. Self-revelation allows readers to see the mindset that I personally bring to the research and the way it can potentially affect the findings. I have plans to work in an elementary school so my interest in this subject correlates with my professional goals. If I discover that books have gender stereotypes, I plan to use this information in the future in my own library to try and develop a collection that does not include stereotypical titles but rather well rounded representations. I also must note that I am under the impression based on previous research and my own reading of children's books that picture books do not fairly represent women or the careers available to them. I will strive to let the research and findings speak to whether or not my personal opinion is true.

I also recognize that many factors about me personally and my background affect the way I approach and analyze the books. As a woman with some feminist ideas, I tend to read more into what the text and pictures are implying about females and this could result in either a misrepresentation of the book or observations that the author and illustrator did not intend but I might find by looking with this lens. As someone with a fortunate childhood background and the experience of a privileged white woman, I expect my analysis and notes to be skewed based on my experiences. For example, what

may appear to me to be a female character restricted to domestic duties of the house could be seen from a different racial or economical perspective as a strong, independent woman who knows how to care for her family.

My educational background will also play a role in how I see the books. I have a post graduate education, am highly literate, and have worked extensively with children's books so I am looking at the picture books much more critically than the average reader would and especially more critically than a child would likely see them. I have been trained to be a librarian and have been indoctrinated with library ethics and values throughout my schooling so I am always looking for how books may or may not qualify for a collection. These values make me likely to prefer books that are diverse in all ways and my particular interest is diversity in gender representation. As an avid reader, it is possible I may overlook more general observations about the books that someone who has never read or studied picture books may have picked up on. The primary disadvantage I have is being an adult. While this is going to be the case with any content analysis done by researchers as opposed to a study that employs children and records their reactions, it is still worth noting. I am drawing conclusions about the effects book characters have on children while my observations about the characters are being made by myself, an adult. It is difficult for me to completely understand the way a child will approach the text so it is important to keep in mind that my findings are based on an adult's analysis of the books.

With the purpose of eliminating as much bias as possible, I will employ the assistance of a second person to code a portion of the selected books. This researcher will analyze five books that I have already studied and will answer the same questions that I

will be using. This repetitive research serves two purposes. First, it will allow me to see how well my analysis aligns with a second perspective so that I have an opportunity to adjust the way I code the books as needed. The second purpose is that the information gathered from our different recordings of the books will help me to recognize any other biases I might have. My second coder was a male who has no training in libraries and does not have much exposure to picture books so he could approach the books with an entirely different perspective than me.

I noticed that the second coder focused more exclusively on the main adult female character even if there were more than one in the story. I on the other hand took notes on each adult female character that appeared no matter how small her role in the story. This could suggest that I am grasping at every small detail to prove that women are present in the stories, but I think that I fairly noted every appearance of a human character no matter what gender they were. The second coder was also more generous when describing the characters' careers. For example, in *Fancy Nancy Poet Extraordinaire*, he recorded that the neighbor, Ms. Devine, was a teacher because she was telling Nancy about a poem that she liked. When I analyzed the books I tried to stay more true to exactly what the text and pictures described the women's careers as. This led to a lot of the characters not having a job listed because it was never mentioned or apparent. The second coder's approach could allow for more description and more hopeful results because there would be more professional employment, but I do not think it would be a fair representation of the books. Therefore I did not change my approach or coding strategies based on his interpretations.

Another interesting conclusion was that he interpreted the mom buying the child things as being the supplier in the book *Ladybug Girl at the Beach*. After prompting though, he clarified that she was spending money which did not necessarily mean that she was the one who earned it. I had not previously thought that spending money would be seen as a role that is typically the male's responsibility, but this was a good point. Even in previous research, scholars have noted shopping as a feminine activity (Stewig, 1975) but it does show that the woman has access to money and control over how it is spent regardless of whether or not she was the one who earned it. This responsibility should be especially noted in this book because the entire family is present during this scene, including the father, but it is the mother who suggests getting an extra scoop of ice cream and pays for all of them (Soman, 2010).

I think the second coder was affected by knowing the purpose of the study based on some of his comments. For example, he said it was interesting that the mother was driving the car when all of the family was present, including the father (Soman, 2010). While this is an example of a woman performing a more stereotypically masculine responsibility, I think that it also shows how the coder (and myself when I was analyzing) are looking for examples of women outside of gender roles. When asked what his observations were from the small sample he analyzed, the second coder said that most were moms and teachers but they did not play a significant role in the story because the children were the main characters. He pointed out that the women were just there as filler, but were not a big part of the story. His conclusions parallel my own from the larger sample of books so I think having him reanalyze some of the books was a successful venture.

Exploratory Research

I will be implementing exploratory research in order to allow for new discoveries that may not be expected when the research begins. Exploratory research refers to broad-ranging, intentional, data collection which is designed to maximize discovery of generalizations that affect the direct understanding of life (Stebbins, 2008). For this case, the life that we will be examining is actually content within children's picture books and I am allowing the text and pictures of the books to speak for themselves rather than only coding them according to a rigid guideline. This is known as emergent coding which will entail questions being established after preliminary analysis has been done to ensure all avenues are explored (Stemler, 2001). Although the analysis will include a set of questions that will always be applied to each book, I will also be open to new findings if they present themselves. If I did not create this opportunity, my findings and conclusions would be limited by my initial presumptions. By expanding my content analysis into exploratory research I am allowing the works to speak for themselves rather than gathering only the information that is fitting to my original hypothesis. What I will be looking for are any instances that do not conform to my expectation, basically any examples of women breaking outside of stereotypical gender roles. Exploratory research opens the door to finding many generalizations that are varied throughout the research (Stebbins, 2008). This type of research allows for many further questions to arise and unfortunately I will not be able to pursue or answer all or many of them. Therefore, these revelations will provide intriguing opportunities for future research which could be more focused on exact questions based on the generalizations I am able to find.

Exploratory research is most beneficial when previous research shows little to no knowledge about a subject (Stebbins, 2008). Lenore Weitzman, whose work I reference often in the literature review, researched a very similar question to mine with findings published in his article *Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children* but the findings are severely outdated since it was published in 1972. His conclusions provide a useful comparison to mine though so that we can see how picture books have or have not evolved over the past several decades in regards to the representation of the genders.

Data Collection

In order to answer the question ‘how are adult women characters portrayed in children’s picture books?’ I compiled and analyzed a collection of children’s books. I selected books from bestseller lists over the past five years (2010-2014). The reason I chose to use bestseller lists to gather my sample is because my motivation in studying this research question is to see what gender stereotypes young readers are being exposed to the most. It is fair to conclude that if a stereotype is repeated enough for a child, they begin to equate an idea from a book with social norms so I want to study the books that most children are repeatedly being exposed to that are reinforcing stereotypes. The best way to select the most read picture books is not necessarily the ones that have won the most awards or that librarians deem worthy of recommendation but rather the books that are flying off the shelves and into the hands of young children. Therefore bestseller lists became the most suitable source to find the books that I would use in my analysis.

The primary source I used to compile the bestselling children's picture books was the *New York Times* Children's Weekly Bestseller List. The weekly bestseller lists are archived on the *New York Times* website so I am able to access which books have been sold the most over the past five years. There is not a cumulative list of the bestselling books for an entire year because that information is only privy to publishers. In lieu of a comprehensive list, I have compiled a list of the books that stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for the most number of weeks. In addition to these bestsellers, I have also incorporated other reliable source's top selling lists in order to expand the list and not rely on one source. By looking at other bestseller lists, I strived to create the most comprehensive and larger sample of books so that I would have a representative set to analyze. I also consulted the lists *School Library Journal's* Top 100 Picture Books, *Huffington Post's* 50 Of The Best Kid's Books Published In The Last 25 Years, *Kirkus* Bestselling Children's Books, and *The Children's Book Review* Best Selling Picture Books which allowed me to bolster the preliminary list I had accumulated from the *New York Times Children's Bestsellers*. There were some books that were repeated across multiple lists which just confirmed that those titles should be in the sample that I analyze. These additional lists also provided some titles that were not on the original list which means they helped to ensure I had a complete sample.

Once this bestseller list was created, I had approximately thirty books for each year, with a total of 142 books on the list. Some of the same titles appeared on multiple year's list so I had to make sure I was not citing each book more than once so this eliminated forty books. This was more than I initially realized because I made sure to look at each book and did not realize that so many titles were repeated. I then used the

following criteria to eliminate books that would not fit the needs of this study. I am only looking at fiction picture books so if any did not fall into this category they were not considered. There were nine books that were nonfiction and one that was an early chapter book so those were removed from the list. Next, I eliminated books that did not have human characters in them which allowed those that have both human and animal characters to stay. Forty-two books only included animals so they were taken out. Books with animal or non-human characters were not included because animal gender is not always immediately evident. Since the purpose of this research study is to determine what examples and options for women are presented in picture books to young girls, I only want to study characters that readers see as a possibility for themselves to become. There are many animal picture books where the animals were not personified at all so these would not be useful to my study. Those animals that were personified tended to have very stereotypical male and female roles, most likely because it would not otherwise be immediately apparent what their gender was. I included all books that have human characters, even if they do not have any adult female characters because I would like to note how many books do not even have female characters. After all of these criteria were applied, I was left with fifty books. Unfortunately though, the books without adult females cannot provide much information towards my question so once I noted those eighteen without adult women were set aside.

I decided to include books that were not published in the past five years if they were recently appearing on the bestseller list. For example, Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* was a bestselling book in 2012, most likely because that is the year a movie based on the book was released. Although the book was originally published in 1971, it became popular

again in 2012 and therefore meets the criteria because it was extensively consumed in the past five years. The same is true for *The Night Before Christmas* which appears on the bestseller list every year around December even though it was originally published in 1823. I also found that in recent years there are some books that were so popular that they were on the bestseller lists for more than a single year. When determining which year's list I should attribute them to I chose the year that the majority of their appearances on the list were in. With all of the criteria applied, the final sample of books that I could analyze with adult female characters dwindled to thirty-one.

Data Analysis

Once the list of books I analyzed was compiled, I first read all of the books. I noted how many of these books did not include any adult female characters at all and how many books did not have women as main characters. Once these are tallied, books without any adult female characters were set aside. Next I did a visual analysis as well as a textual analysis of the forty-two books remaining to record how the women are portrayed in both the words of the story and the illustrations. I used a rubric that asked questions about what the women are doing and more specifically whether they have a career or if their main role is as a wife or mother. I answered the following questions about each adult woman in the book:

- What is her career?
- What is her job described as in the text?
- Where is she physically located? (in the house?)
- What is she wearing?

- What is her role in relationship to the story? (Mother, aunt, teacher, neighbor etc.)
- What is her role in the family? (Head of household, homemaker, or both)
- What actions is she performing?
- What other notable aspects are there about her in regards to her gender?

I answered all of these questions for each book if they are possible and fitting to that specific story and took detailed and extensive notes. Rather than trying to make each character fit into categories, I took notes that included as much information as is presented in the picture book. This allowed me to let the content speak for itself and then draw conclusions once I have enough information to compare all of the books.

Limitations

The most notable limitation of this study is the size of the sample of books I analyzed. Although I started with 142 books from best seller lists, only thirty-one met the requirements for the content analysis and were able to be included in the study on women in picture books. This is a starting point that could establish trends that could later be studied more in depth with a larger sample of books. Another limitation that emerged throughout the process of analyzing the books was that there are multiple books that are from the same series. Each title was analyzed individually and each adult woman was recorded because they were performing different actions in different places in each book even when it was the same mother figure from a series. Granted that each adult woman from each book was recorded separately, it must be noted that several of them are from the same series of books, specifically *Ladybug Girl* and *Fancy Nancy*. This does create a slight slant to the results because multiple results are products of the exact same author

and illustrator team who usually depict the woman figure similarly from book to book. There was an instance though when an author and illustrator team from one book, *Silverlicious*, did not include an adult female in another book in the series that appeared on the best seller list, *Emeraldalicious*. This shows that while some authors have a consistent character developed in a series, some allow for fluctuations that could result in stereotypes present in some books and not others.

Findings and Discussion

General Observations

After completing an in-depth analysis of thirty-one best-selling picture books from the past five years, I found that adult female women are most often represented as mothers in both text and pictures. However, my original hypothesis was not completely accurate because I found that the adult women had a far more influential role than the adult men in the stories. Although the adult women characters are primarily represented in the domestic sphere, I found that they are significantly more present than adult men in the stories. Contrary to my preconceived notions about picture books, the majority of the main characters were children and therefore the adults in the books were merely secondary characters that provided filler. Of the thirty-one books I analyzed, there were fifty adult female characters but not a single one of them were the main character in the story but this is unsurprising given that these are children's books.

In direct response to my motivation to study this research question, I found that the adult female characters rarely were depicted being employed outside of the home. This technically does support my initial hypothesis, but thanks to exploratory research, I

discovered that there is more to this issue than the females' employment. Although the mothers in the story are not portrayed as having jobs, I realized that the fathers' are also lacking a job description. Even more concerning is the fact that many of the fathers are not in the story at all and if they are they do not play a role but are simply pictured in the background. Weitzman originally deemed the phenomenon of the lack of women in picture books "the invisible female" but it seems that this has changed over time to create a new problem of 'the invisible father.' (Weitzman, 1972). Initially, my concern was about young girls perceptions of themselves based on the portrayals of women in picture books. This is still a valid concern because women are primarily being portrayed as mothers and rarely depicted with any professional employment. In addition to this concern though is an equally valid question about what adult male models are being presented to young boy readers. I found that when the child was the main character, the father was mostly not present and if he was he rarely spoke. Since I was conducting emergent coding, I started to note an unexpected trend in which the mother was the only adult present. This happened in four books where the mother was included and the father was not even mentioned.

Of the fifty books that had human characters, there were nineteen that did not include any adult females at all. Six of these books though did not include any adults at all so at least the genders were equally unrepresented in those titles. There were only two books that were noted as having adult men and no adult women. This shows we have made major strides in the representation of women in picture books, even to the extent of women being more present than men. Once I realized that they are present in the stories, the next question becomes how they are being portrayed. It is interesting that the majority

of the adult characters are not depicted in jobs. This is not to say that they are unemployed, but their employment is not important to the story so it is never addressed. It is possible that many of the women in the stories have a job outside of the home and all of the scenes are simply in the evening or on the weekend when she is home with the kids and her job is not relevant to the story. Regardless of if this is the case, a child will most likely not be able to think that abstractly and will quickly come to the conclusion that the mother is not employed and her primary responsibility is child rearing.

In the majority of the books, the woman was responsible for caring for the child, watching over the child, and other domestic responsibilities like cooking, cleaning and reading to the child. Even though the focus of the stories is on the central child character, these domestic portrayals of the women in the books can be detrimental to the reader's view towards women's role in society. With this sample of books, a reader could easily come to the conclusion that the woman's primary role is as a mother which could limit the possibilities of professional employment for women. An argument can also be made that the mother is portrayed as more important because she is the adult that is actually present and speaking while the father is missing or silent. This discussion depends on the reader's view of caregiving. In previous studies it has been argued that taking care of children and other domestic responsibilities are less important than professional careers. Weitzman writes that "training for a dependent passive role may inhibit a girl's chances for intellectual or creative success" (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1130). This is an inaccurate assumption though because caring for children can be a creative and challenging role. The concern of this study is not whether women are portrayed as creative or intellectual, because there are clear examples of that, but rather whether women are restricted to

stereotypical roles. Throughout the content analysis, it became clear that the recurring stereotypical role was as a mother. Almost all of the women observed in the picture books were engaging in motherly activities and rarely were they participating in wifely duties. This leads to the conclusion that readers are being presented with the role of motherhood as their primary option when they grow up, not being a wife which was the other portrayal I expected to see in addition to mothers.

Careers

The most often recurring career in the picture books is undoubtedly that of a mother and homemaker. Of the fifty adult female characters, twenty-seven of them were described or portrayed as primarily mothers with no professional employment. This includes grandmothers because their role in the stories is a mothering figure to both the mother and the grandchild. There were, however, several appearances of aunts but these relatives were not counted as mothers because they were not directly involved in mothering the child but rather were less engaged, secondary characters. The professions that women held are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Careers

<u>Career in text and illustrations</u>	<u>Number of occurrences</u>
Teacher	3
Librarian	2
Scientist	2
Dance Teacher, Witch, Painter, Singer, Architect, Activist, Airplane Builder, Farmer	1 of each

As you can see, the most common profession was that of a teacher. This is a trend that is seen in research in the past (Stewig, 1973; Stewig, 1975) and even though the woman is thankfully out of the home and has a career it is still a stereotypically female profession. The same is true for the two occurrences of librarians because this profession is predominately women so it is difficult to applaud these careers since they are furthering stereotypes that women are restricted to certain jobs like mothers, teachers, librarians, etc. There was one occurrence of a male teacher in *Extra Yarn* which is encouraging because it shows that men are stepping outside of their stereotypical careers and that teaching is not only for women. The stereotype of men being defined by their career while authors fail to mention female characters' profession permeates in these books. One instance of this is in *The Very Fairy Princess: Here Comes the Flower Girl* where when the engaged couple is introduced the man is described by his job of fire chief while the woman is just called Aunt Sue. If women are going to be seen as equal to men in text, it is important that their professions be seen as an important detail of their character development. Although Aunt Sue's profession was not a completely necessary detail to the story, neither was her fiancé's but his was included because it seemed important to point out that he had a job. Authors need to view character development of females as more important so that they look deeper into these women's character and detail her life and profession instead of simply placing her in the kitchen and furthering gender stereotypes.

The majority of the books were published in recent years but there were a few with settings from the past which led to the portrayal of more stereotypical gender roles. For example, in *Locomotive* which is set in 1869 the men have a multitude of jobs including brakemen, fireman, engineer and conductor while the women are just silent

passengers. The male characters seem to be the only ones capable of working and the women are exclusively watching the children or simply sleeping in the background of the pictures. It is important that a story like this be discussed with children because it is historically accurate but they need to be made aware that the gender roles depicted are not still applicable today.

Another important detail to make note of about this list of female professions is that four of them come from one book. *Of Thee I Sing* is a letter written by Barack Obama to his daughters and it references famous men and women throughout history. This book becomes an outlier with four women all with serious professions that slant the results. From this book alone we find a painter, singer, architect, and activist but if it is removed there would only be eleven professional careers outside the home observed in this entire sample of best-selling picture books. Looking at this individual book, four women seems like a noteworthy amount of women but in the context of the book it is less than a third of the historical figures mentioned. For a story that is written specifically for young girls, his daughters, there are a surprisingly limited number of females mentioned; instead famous men with prominent professions dominate the book.

Physical Appearance and Location of Women

The results of the study show that women are not illustrated in a stereotypical way with the majority of women dressed in pants and a shirt. Today's culture does not demand or expect that women dress in stereotypically female attire. With this being the case in our society, it would be expected that picture books would follow this trend. However, the majority of women in today's society are employed and yet this is not

reflected in children's literature so it cannot be assumed that there would be a parallel with female clothing. While there were significantly more women dressed in gender neutral attire like pants and shirts, the illustrations still include a number of other female specific outfits as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Female Attire

<u>Clothes female characters are wearing</u>	<u>Number of Occurrences</u>
Pants and shirt	22
Skirt & shirt	13
Dress	10
Robe/Nightgown	2
Traditional Pakistani Clothing	2
Dance Leotard	1

Without further research into what women in today's culture wear in their everyday life, it is difficult to conclude if these illustrations are an accurate portrayal of today's women. It is safe to venture that the variety is somewhat representative with some characters in traditional female clothing and others in gender neutral clothing. Looking at the quantity of women wearing each different outfit, the proportions do not seem to be entirely accurate. If you combine the number of characters wearing skirts and dresses you have twenty three women which is almost half of the characters analyzed and more than those wearing pants. Keeping in mind that a large majority of these female characters' primary role in the story is as a mother, the apparel seems even less appropriate because this role does not require women to wear dresses or skirts and they would more likely be wearing

pants. Further research would be required to confirm these assumptions but initial observations of the books lead to the belief that women are incorrectly represented as much more dressy in children's picture books.

In regards to the women's location in the picture books, the content analysis revealed that a considerable number of the women are located outside of the home which is encouraging because this indicated that women are breaking outside of the domestic sphere. Only twelve of the fifty women were pictured inside their homes, about a quarter of the female characters. This is absolutely a step in the right direction and a victory for women defeating physical restrictions on their gender. Unfortunately the victories end there because similar to previous research it was realized that the women are outside of the home and in the world but only in certain parts of it (Stewig, 1975). For example, there was a surprisingly large quantity of women, eight characters, who were just outside the home in the garden which could be considered still in the domestic sphere. In addition to these typically feminine locations, there were female characters outside of the home in their place of employment like schools, a dance studio, the zoo, or at a singing club. Corresponding to the lack of careers for the women in these books, the majority of characters are not presented in professional employment locations besides these just listed. In addition to these characters, there were twenty-one instances of females being in various places outside of the home for activities besides work. Most of these locations are connected to family outings like the beach, camping in the woods, shopping with children, and in general entertaining children outside of the home. It is encouraging to see the mothers move outside of the kitchen and home but their responsibilities still remain

the same with their primary duty being to take care of the children which sometimes allows them to venture outdoors.

Women's Responsibilities

One of the most intriguing questions that was asked about each adult female character was “What actions is she performing?” Since the results concerning the employment of the women indicated that female characters do not typically have a job mentioned, the actions she is engaging in are very telling of how she is spending her time. The analysis revealed that the most common activity women are engaged in is caring for and watching over children. Undoubtedly this is a valued and important responsibility but it is not an example of women stepping outside of typical gender roles. Even more unfavorable is the fact that the men in the stories are not participating in caring for the children which gives readers the impression that child rearing is exclusively the woman's obligation. As referenced in the location section, the second most common activity is gardening or working in the yard. The third most repeated activity is yet another stereotypically female task, cooking and baking. Looking at the top three actions that women were found doing, it is clear that women have not gained the right engage in traditionally masculine activities. With these results, it is apparent that the message young girls are receiving from picture books is that their place is in the domestic sphere, taking care of their family and their house.

All of the actions women are doing in the picture books are detailed in Table 3. Taking a closer look at the list, it can be understood that the women are primarily engaged in feminine activities like shopping, reading to children, cleaning, or sewing.

There are a few occasions in which women are challenging gender stereotypes by performing masculine activities like building a fire or other outdoor activities, but unfortunately these are limited in the midst of the bulk of women who fit the traditional female mold. A few encouraging instances were found when the mother took on important roles. In *Ladybug Girl at the Beach* the mother appears to be the more dominant parent as she exhibits uncommon traits of the head of the household. Although the father is present, it is the mother who handles paying for ice cream which could indicate that it is her own money and she also is shown driving the family while the father sleeps. The mother in *Fancy Nancy: Splenderiferous Christmas* also displays qualities of the head of household when she has the final say about decisions like which Christmas tree to purchase. The teacher in *Horton and the Kwuggerbug and More Lost Stories* does not conform to female gender limitations and is presented as very smart, even able to see through the children's lies. Although these scenarios are rare, they are beacons of hope that picture books can portray admirable women that young girls should be reading about.

Table 3: Actions Performed by Women Characters

<u>Actions</u>	# of Occurrences
Caring for child/watching child	14
Gardening/working in yard	7
Cooking/baking	6
Outdoor activities (camping, hiking, playing sports, riding horses, rowing a boat)	5
Giving advice/encouraging child	4
Teaching	4
Reading to child	3
Shopping	3
Singing	3
Sewing/knitting clothes	2
Providing books	2
Lounging/sunbathing	2
Reading	2
Watching men do action	2
Caring for animals	2
Sleeping	2
Riding train/traveling	2
Building fire	2
Volunteering in community	2
Cleaning/decorating house	2
Dancing	1
Driving	1
Getting married	1
Painting	1
Building	1
Talking on phone	1

Women as Inspiration

There was a noticeable trend of the adult females in many of the stories playing a significant role in motivating and inspiring the main character. This does mean that the woman was not the main character but in most cases the main character was a child and she plays a pivotal role in the story which makes the woman essential to the plot. There were five notable incidents of the woman being the inspiration for the story. In *The Christmas Sweater*, the mother's love is seen as magical and when she knits a sweater for the son it has special powers because she made it with love. The invisible father trend continues in this story while the mother plays an important role. She is shown performing stereotypical domestic duties like knitting and cooking but it is more encouraging that she is seen as an inspiration to the child which shows that she holds power in the family.

In the remarkable book that challenges gender stereotypes *Rosie Revere Engineer*, the main character's great-great aunt Rose is her inspiration. Not only is she described as having a traditionally manly job of an airplane builder, she also is the source of change in the story as she inspires Rosie to build her very own inventions. In *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, the main character is a man but the inspiration behind the entire plot of the story is a female librarian who he describes as a lovely lady and opens a world of possibilities to him by sharing her flying books. Another book where the woman is the inspiration to the main character is *Me...Jane* which tells the story of a young girl that is motivated to follow her dreams of being a scientist after learning about her role model, Jane Goodall. After reading about Goodall, the young girl character learns about the possibility of living in Africa and taking care of animals which eventually leads to her following in her footsteps.

This theme of female inspirers continues in ways that are less pointedly that the woman is inspiration and rather are examples of women being respected or admired in the stories. This was an apparent trend specifically in the *Fancy Nancy* series where the mom played a significant role in the story by encouraging her daughter. In *Fancy Nancy and the Mermaid Ballet*, Nancy says “I am 100 percent positive that my mom is the wisest mother in the world” (O’Connor, 2010, p. 11). This admiration and respect is an excellent example of how adult women should be portrayed and treated in picture books in order for young readers to learn that they are equal to their male counterparts. Nancy again displays this respect for the adult women in her life in *Fancy Nancy: Poet Extraordinaire* where she writes an ode about how great her teacher, Ms. Glass is. *Fancy Nancy* has received some negative feedback because Nancy is the epitome of a girly-girl but in this book she boosts the importance of the women in her life by showing how much she admires her teacher and seeking her out for help with questions. In addition to these admirable women though is the character Ms. Devine who is Nancy’s neighbor and matches Nancy by being exceptionally girly with stereotypical female aspects like her love of gardening and excessive make-up and jewelry.

Notable Dads

Even though the purpose of this study was to look specifically at adult women in children’s literature, the exploratory research methods allowed for the discovery and inclusion of some notable male figures in the picture books. In addition to the widespread lack of adult male presence in the books, there are several instances that further ingrain male gender stereotypes. The picture book *Stick Man* is the adventure of a personified stick with human characters interacting with the stick to create a humorous plot. Gender

limitations are seen in this story where the man plays a role in the story and is actively involved in speaking while the woman is only present in the pictures but does not speak or get mentioned in the text. This trend that allows men more prominent roles in picture books has been recorded in the past and is still present today. *Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site* was one of the most popular books that was on the *New York Times Children's Bestseller* list, appearing on the list for 167 weeks. In this book there is only one very small appearance of a human in the midst of a book focused on construction vehicles but it is a man that yells at the machines. With evidence such as these books and others, it appears that when a character is not essential to the plot of a story, authors and illustrators tend to fill in with men more than women.

In the book *Journey* the main character is the child and the parents are nonspeaking characters in the background but both the mother and father are depicted in stereotypical illustrations. The mother is shown cooking and talking on the phone while the father is pictured in the office working on the computer. This conveys that the mother is restricted to household duties while the father works. Both of these characters are not important to the plot of the story and thus their presence is merely filler to set the scene. The danger in this situation becomes that authors and illustrators' natural instinct of how to portray men and women characters that they are not intensely developing is to quickly throw them into the story as the 'normal' mother or father figure. The problem is that the 'normal' mother and father in the background are almost always portrayed in stereotypical fashions.

Thankfully these stereotypical instances are accompanied by a few moments of fathers stepping outside of their typical gender roles and being admirable role models for

young boys. In *The Curious Garden*, it may initially seem stereotypical because the mother is gardening but upon further inspection it is revealed that the father and the entire family are gardening, making it an equal gender activity. Similarly, in *The Very Fairy Princess: Here Comes the Flower Girl*, the mother is gardening but the father is also working in the yard. There could be a distinction made between working the garden which is traditionally seen as women's work and manly yard work like mowing but the critical detail is that both the mother and father are working alongside each other as equals. Pictures and stories like this show that there are not boundaries among the genders because the mother and father could move interchangeably around the yard and share all responsibilities equally. This same scenario emerges in *Charlie the Ranch Dog* where both parents are working on the farm but the mom is gardening while the dad is out in the field mending fences. Whether or not these tasks are defined as male or female is up to interpretation but it is interesting that women are found gardening countless times throughout all of the books analyzed.

There is an uncommon instance of a father taking on the responsibility of chauffeuring children in *Fancy Nancy and the Mermaid Ballet* when he is the one that picks up the girls from dance practice. The task of watching children and transporting them to activities is almost exclusively handled by the women in all of the other stories so it is progressive to see this father upsetting that gender norm. In yet another *Fancy Nancy* book, *Fancy Nancy and the Fabulous Fashion Boutique*, the author breaks the standard of the silent father and writes the father as the involved and speaking parent while the mother is silent. This same phenomenon happens in *Ladybug Girl and Bingo*. It would be more beneficial for a reader to encounter equal parental roles where they are both present,

speaking, and involved but considering the variety seen in the *Fancy Nancy* and *Ladybug Girl* series, this is a great advance for gender stereotypes.

One example of an equal share of responsibilities is in *Knuffle Bunny Free* where the mother comforts and cares for the child while the father is involved in solving the problem of the lost stuffed animal. Both parents play a role in the resolution of the story and are seen as important to the child. Another alert and involved father is in the classic tale of *The Night Before Christmas* where the mother does not even wake up and the father is the excited one. In the same two page spread of *Ladybug Girl and the Dress-Up Dilemma* there are both stereotypical females and a dad breaking stereotypes. The main father of *Ladybug Girl* has taken the responsibility of taking the kids trick-or-treating which would usually be classified as a motherly duty just like watching over the children but in the illustration the mother is not even present so the dad took the kids on his own. In the background though, there are multiple families trick-or-treating and all of the other kids are accompanied by women, furthering a stereotype even if it is just in the peripheral images. Progress is being made to break down gender stereotypes but authors and illustrators need to be actively aware of this issue or else instinct can lead to images that ingrain stereotypes in young readers' minds.

Conclusion

Through an in depth content analysis of thirty-one picture books it was revealed that women have become more present in children's literature but unfortunately their roles are still limited to mostly mothers and traditionally female professions. The surprising discovery was the lack of father presence in many of the stories. While the

women were depicted as mothers in the stories, they were much more engaged with the children than the men who were sometimes not present and if they were they were mostly silent and uninvolved. The hypothesis about female employment in comparison to male employment took an unexpected turn because even though the women are not depicted as having professional employment, neither are many of the men. It was revealed that the parent's jobs are rarely an important detail to the story since most of the books focus on the child as the main character, leaving the adults to be secondary, filler characters. Without employment to define the women, the activities they were engaged in became the most prominent indicator of their role in the story. These actions revealed that the women are predominately engaged in feminine, domestic responsibilities like childcare, gardening, and cooking. This leads to the conclusion that women are restricted to domestic responsibilities even if though they are not explicitly contained within the house.

In comparison to previous research, this study reveals that there has been progress over the years but as always there is more improvement to be done. In 1973 a similar study revealed that men's activities were predominately active and they were not involved in domestic duties (Stewig, 1973). With the exclusion of the few notable dads, it appears that this is still the case in picture books today because the household responsibilities still fall on the shoulders of the women. Our results also align with a content analysis performed in 1975 where the most common profession was a school teacher and the most repeated activity was watching over a child (Stewig, 1975). Only 32% of the women in our study had professional employment outside of the home which is the exact same percentage that was found in 1975 (Stewig, 1975). It was shown in

1996 that female characters were found outside the home now but they were not employed (Oskamp, 1996) which is the same trend seen in the most recent bestsellers where women are not physically regulated to the home but they are constrained by household duties. There appears to have been more advancement in terms of gender presence though because our study exhibited more books with female characters playing bigger roles than males and some books with only adult females and no men. As women are beginning to be more present in children's literature, their next step towards gender equality is to be depicted performing actions outside of their domestic capacity and hopefully gain professional employment.

Implications for Further Research

With the findings from this research, there are many avenues that could potentially be further explored from ideas that emerged in the research process. One question that this research prompts is 'what is the role and presence of the father in children's picture books?' The assumption at the beginning on my research was that only women were stereotypically represented while men dominated picture books because that was the result of content analyses in the past. There is a surprising and unfortunate trend though to exclude fathers from books that present families. This is a disturbing shift that is not beneficial to female characters. Child readers need to see equal representation and portrayals of the genders in picture books in order for them to comprehend the shared value of both men and women. Another research project could look specifically at children's books that feature family units and conduct a content analysis of the men in those that is similar to the analysis I did of women in my research.

Another avenue to pursue would be to use a different set of books to analyze the women using the same questions I used. These bestselling books tend to have repetitive characters from series and have the slant of being most popular in public opinion. If the same content analysis was conducted among award winners, the results may be more encouraging because they would be analyzing books with vetted content. It would also be interesting to use this structure as a springboard into children's fiction. This kind of analysis would involve a deeper textual focus with rarely any pictures to examine but there would be greater character development that could possibly lead to more detailed adult women who break gender norms. The issue of gender stereotypes in children's literature is far from resolved and only through further research, publication and wider awareness of the problem can it be resolved.

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